

# Moving the goal posts for Montgomery workers

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In December, the Montgomery County Council [changed the rules governing impasses in collective bargaining](#) with the county's public employee unions to require arbitrators to consider the county's "ability to pay" ahead of all other factors. The result? All three impasse arbitrations involving union workers in Montgomery County this year have been rendered in favor of the "most reasonable" - the union side.

Apparently, that's not what was supposed to happen; The Post, crying foul because the union side has prevailed in 16 of 20 arbitrations over the past 26 years, now suggests the goal posts should be moved again to "[level the field](#)." It seems the arbitration system will still be "broken" until management is sure to prevail.

Some background: The bargaining for general government units in Montgomery County covers about 7,500 people represented by Local 1994 of the United Food & Commercial Workers Union. In the current dispute, management demanded \$25 million in savings, and we gave them *that*. But it turned out it wasn't that \$25 million that they wanted.

It's at that point that the good citizens of Montgomery County may be asking: Why is my government wasting money fighting with the union in arbitration when the union was cooperating by laying \$25 million in hard cash savings on the table?

The answer, unfortunately, appears to be that arbitration isn't really the issue. It's a disdain for collective bargaining.

This year, in Wisconsin and elsewhere around the country, it has been clear to all where such sentiments can lead. But it doesn't have to be that way here. Now in the third full year of austerity, Montgomery County has already cut services to the bone. The libraries are running on fumes; bus routes have been eliminated and maintenance reduced. Public safety spending is treacherously thin. The same is true for health services, especially for the elderly and children.

After all this, it is not possible to argue that the problem is that the county's workforce is pampered, or that the county does too much for its citizens. The problem is a revenue problem. The poor, the unemployed, the homeless - they've all paid more than their fair share.

Who's left?

We know who they are. The country clubs that pay taxes on less than one-tenth the value of their land; businesses such as Live Nation, which is [enjoying millions of dollars in giveaways](#) to build a rock-and-roll venue. There are others. We need to tax those who can afford it more and stop giving them handouts they don't need.

We also need some new thinking from our elected leaders. Just last week in The Post, [columnist Allan Sloan argued](#) that raising taxes on economic elites won't work because they are "ultra mobile" - it's just too easy for the wealthy and powerful to migrate to another jurisdiction if they're prodded to do their part. It would be "rational," he said, to tag corporations and the super-rich with higher taxes. But he added: "Rationality seems to have vanished from public life - or at least from political life."

Seems to me that's an admission that our governments are too puny, and our journalists too timid, to hold the power elite accountable. The solution lies in stiffened spines by elected officials, and a willingness to call out the irresponsible institutions, corporations and employers that refuse to shoulder their share of the load.

Recall the words of one Grover Norquist, the anti-tax activist who famously said the goal of the conservative movement is to shrink government so small that it can be drowned in a bathtub. Maybe others are ready to surrender, but the unions representing public employees - in Montgomery County and around the country - are not going to be thrown into that bathtub without a fight.